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Remembering the imperial context of emancipation commemoration in the former British slave-port cities of Bristol and Liverpool, 1933-1934

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Abstract

This article considers the marking of the centenary of British emancipation in 1933 and 1934 in two former slave-trading provincial port cities, Bristol and Liverpool. Nationally, this centenary was used by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society (ASAPS) to celebrate white abolition heroes and promote contemporary campaigns against 'modern-day slavery'. However, in Bristol and Liverpool this picture was complicated by both cities' particular historic involvements in transatlantic slavery and contemporary imperial and demographic contexts. Looking at 'local' dimensions to this 'national' commemorative occasion brings to the fore variations which emphasise the influence of civic identities, racial contestations and the distinctly imperial context of this memorial discourse seen through these interwar ports of empire.

Keywords: slavery memory, emancipation, commemoration, memory, port cities, anniversaries

Introduction

The centenary commemorations of the Emancipation Act (passed in 1833, coming into force in 1834) in 1933 and 1934 in the former provincial slave-port cities of Bristol and Liverpool diverged from the national picture. Here, the commemorations were framed by specific civic historical identity narratives and contemporary imperial and demographic contexts. Research by John Oldfield has demonstrated how the centenary was used nationally by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society (ASAPS), who organised much of the official programme, to further their campaigns against ‘modern-day slavery’. However, a more in-depth look in these two major ports of empire illustrates both the distinctly imperial contexts that public discourse around the centenary took, including around the ‘modern-day slavery’ campaign, and the contested, contradictory and conflicted process using this past had in provincial places connected so famously with slave-trading, a context largely missed through a national survey of this activity. This article advances this scholarship by considering variations in provincial engagements which bring into focus the distinctly imperial dimensions to this commemorative activity. Whilst Bristol, bolstered by its non-conformist history, took up the ‘modern-day slavery’ cause with fervour, the city’s status as ‘Gateway of Empire’ imbued this campaign with distinctly imperial overtones. Comparatively, public promotional support for this campaign was limited in Liverpool, where commemorative discourse was further challenged by those

framed as colonial ‘others’ and by the city’s unique historic and contemporary black presence, a demographic diversity not matched by Bristol.

In *Chords of Freedom*, John Oldfield meticulously mapped a series of rituals and commemorative events surrounding abolition in Britain from the nineteenth century onwards. In this important work, Oldfield argued that through this ritual endeavour, Britain established a ‘culture of abolitionism’ which re-worked the popular memory of slavery into the memory of its *abolition* through the celebration of anniversaries marking the births and deaths of ‘heroes’ such as Wilberforce, Clarkson and Buxton. Nationally, 250 commemorative events took place between March 1933 and November 1934 to mark the centenary of Emancipation. Organised in large part under the direction of ASAPS, activities included meetings, special religious services, 17 performances of a pageant play, and lantern lectures.¹ Oldfield argued that the history of slavery (more accurately abolition) was (and is) a ‘usable past’. The emancipation centenary was ‘used’ to promote ASAPS’s campaign against ‘modern-day slavery’ around the world. However, this campaign should be considered against a longer context of nineteenth-century imperial endeavour and memory-work which ‘uses’ the 1830s emancipation acts.

Emancipation, Imperial Memory, and ‘Modern-Day Slavery’

The memory of emancipation had been part of an evolving imperial context, used within and concurrently shaped by the ‘anti-slavery’ campaigns of empire. As Marcus Wood has powerfully written, the memory of enslavement across European nation states has been used time and again to obscure historic traumas of empire.²

Developing nineteenth-century ‘uses’ of the slavery ‘archive’ justified British

imperial activity in Africa as ‘anti-slavery’, a form of ‘moral capital’ which could validate almost any act of empire.³ The growth of an ‘anti-slavery empire’, however, was entangled within broader imperial processes and a mesh of interlocking (and at times conflicting) ideologies, intimately interlinked with religious institutions and their position within an expanding British Empire.

The culturally incestuous relationship between anti-slavery and religious missionary movements, for example, has forged a memory of slavery, or more specifically a memory of emancipation, shaped within a religious framework, and fashioned by a compelling evangelical discourse. Emancipation was itself seen as a cue to ‘evangelise’ African people. Ralph Wardlaw, Scottish Presbyterian clergyman and anti-slavery campaigner, said of the freed slaves following the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1834 that ‘[t]hey need another emancipation – the emancipation proclaimed by the Gospel Jubilee’, placing new energies of conversion within a biblical context.⁴ Within this evangelical framework, the concept of *redemption* has been at the forefront of engagements with the memory of slavery and emancipation and has continued to frame such remembrance. Recompense and redemption, making good past wrongs and saving souls from historic sins, forged a Christian framework which, through the further and increasingly active public presence and work of both anti-slavery advocates and religious missionaries, formed a membrane of guilt through which future memories of slavery and emancipation would be viewed and interpreted. The ‘debt’ of slavery and emancipation, therefore, was twofold. There was a debt of freedom put onto the enslaved as Wood has argued, but also a debt for enslavers to repay which was articulated through an imperial frame: that Britain owed the world the same freedoms it bestowed upon its own colonies.⁵

The concept of redemption within slavery memory has been further informed by memorial constructs which align to Judeo-Christian paradigms. David Brion Davis, writing on the 150th anniversary of British Emancipation, argued that the idea of an ‘Emancipation Moment’ - an instantaneous act of freedom-giving, a process Davis likens to the manumission ritual, is a myth which has been furthered by subsequent acts of memory.⁶ This myth permeates both national levels of Britain’s memory of emancipation and is quite clearly echoed in local contexts too, especially within religious institutional frames. During the United Service for the Emancipation Centenary at Bristol Cathedral, the Reverend R.W. Thompson described the emancipation moment in British Dominions as it took place in church buildings;

On 9 July 31, 1834, churches and chapels of the slaveowning colonies opened and were speedily filled by slaves. As midnight slowly approached they knelt trembling in prayer. As 12 o’clock boomed from the bells the great moment had come. The slaves sprang to their feet and half shouting, half sobbing proclaimed, “We are free.”⁷

Emancipation was, in practice, gradual - a long, drawn-out process of policy change, clauses and compromise which saw slavery graduate to indenture and freedom from bondage lead into economic reliance and servitude. Like Wood, Davis argues that like the Calvinist sinner, the recipient of ‘freedom’ in British colonial contexts was afterwards in debt, emancipation having created a new bondage, one of obligation.⁸ This new status of domination was itself justified through a rhetoric cast in a religious discourse concerning freedom. In 1933 and 1934 this myth of an ‘Emancipation Moment’ was used alongside later acts of the nineteenth-century imperial mission to

create a 'heritage' of Emancipation, a backstory of spontaneous moral moments of righteous action.

Recently, there has been a burgeoning scholarship around the connections between humanitarianism and empire, histories of which, Rob Skinner and Alan Lester argue, should view both as 'mutually constituted aspects of modernity'.⁹ New attention has been paid to the origins, developments and imperial-themed propaganda employed by humanitarian campaigns which framed charitable work as part of a broader 'imperial international responsibility', drawing on patriotic notions of empire as a moral force.¹⁰ As Emily Baughan has argued, the increasingly internationalist outlook of interwar political sentiment following the First World War shifted imperial discourse to consider places beyond the British Empire as part of a broader international moral geography.¹¹ International movements (which were supported 'at home') also actively campaigned against empire during the interwar period, marking a shift away from empire as the mechanism through which Britain engaged with the wider world. This was reflected within ASAPS broadening its remit which included cases of slavery in territories beyond direct British control, though with some clear imperial connections. This included territories where 'British subjects and British capital are employed, or those from which British subjects draw their raw material' such as Peru, and the campaign sought support from those who were 'interested in the welfare of the weaker races'.¹² As Baughan suggests, this more 'modern' interwar discourse of internationalism also saw despair and barbarity descending through the cracks in empire wrought by the First World War, which strengthened and sharpened 'deep-seated imperial imaginings of British superiority and corresponding humanitarian responsibility.'¹³

Recent scholarship has also focused on understanding twentieth-century humanitarianism as part of a much longer set of imperial relations and traditions.¹⁴ Ongoing humanitarian campaigns (rather than those enacted in emergencies) as Michael Barnett argues, have their roots in eighteenth-century antislavery campaigns (as well as concurrent evangelicalism and sentimentality).¹⁵ Crucially, therefore, humanitarian efforts were both shaped by and shaped colonial encounters and imperial relationships.¹⁶ This was clear during the interwar period, a time of both popular imperialism and growing internationalist ideals, alongside growing opposition to empire.¹⁷ However, the 1930s also brought high unemployment and international uncertainty as far as the British Empire was concerned.¹⁸ Public anxiety and uncertainty wrought by economic fragility complicated engagements with historic and contemporary narratives of empire.

ASAPS stated that their centenary campaign's aims were to uphold the 1833 act in British possessions and, ambitiously, to bring about the 'World abolition of slavery and systems analogous to it'.¹⁹ Much of the society's aims were couched in a language of imperialistic paternalism, calling for the 'stronger races' of the world to provide a 'Sacred Trusteeship' for 'the child races of the world'.²⁰ The language of the campaign as a whole was also framed through a narrative of redemption and of recompense, familiar to the nineteenth-century development of emancipation memory. There was, in this sense, a 'debt' to be paid, that 'Britain was still under a great debt to the coloured races' as Richard Wilberforce, great-great-grandson of William suggested at Bristol's centenary committee's meeting in December 1933.²¹

The society saw as its 'only weapon' within this campaign the force of public opinion (presumably alongside the £20,000 centenary fund). Such support was to be fostered and maintained largely through the celebration of Emancipation across the

British Empire which, the society claimed, should ‘educate public opinion in the work which remains to be done’.²² In the imperial port cities considered, Bristol actively and passionately promoted this cause within public discourse, whereas Liverpool’s local press only touched briefly on the issue. Bristol’s local press echoed the national framings of the emancipation centenary where emancipation was presented as a great moral victory which Britain spearheaded in a show of moral leadership and that ‘the lead given by Great Britain was followed throughout the civilised world’.²³ This articulation was followed by the familiar declaration of there being ‘work still to be done’, that ‘even now slavery in all its forms has not been completely rooted out’.²⁴ In an article written by the Reverend A. Dann, vicar of St Nathaniel’s Church in Redland, Bristol, he reiterated the familiar claim that ‘the lead given by Britain has been followed’ and is now ‘the policy of most civilised nations’.²⁵ However, like other commentators, Dann’s positive, whiggish narrative of ‘progress over time’ is followed by a nod to the hard work still to be done, again quoting the familiar ‘5,000,000’ figure in modern-day slavery, half of whom, he claims are in Africa. Dann ends his article by calling on men and women of similar ‘vision and determination’ to the ‘prophets of freedom’ past to continue the task, until slavery has been ‘stamped out both in the mountains of Africa and in the plains of Asia.’

Some of the tone of activities and discourse of the centenary in Bristol echoed the more internationalist humanitarian efforts of the interwar period. The centenary pageant play, ‘Slavery’, which appeared in venues nationally was staged in Bristol by pupils at Badminton House School.²⁶ Badminton House was a public school formerly based in Clifton, which had relocated to a country house estate in Westbury-on-Trym. Under the direction of Beatrice May Baker (1876 – 1973), who was outwardly critical of nationalistic teachings of Empire and the history of the slave trade, the school had

taken on the headmistresses' progressive, internationalist, and pacifist outlook. The school adhered closely to the ethos of the League of Nations, with pupils carrying excerpts from the organisation's covenant and undertaking field trips to the headquarters in Geneva.²⁷ Baker also wrote a ('locally' framed) 'Bristol plea to abolish slavery' in the *Western Daily Press* in which she discussed 'modern-day slavery' in Ethiopia, and the 'Negro Republic of Liberia' (which, having been formed in 1830s as a 'home for freed slaves' brought forth the 'saddest thoughts').²⁸ Like other public discourse at this time, Baker called for the British people to complete 'the work so successfully begun 100 years ago' by Wilberforce, Clarkson, Buxton and Livingstone.²⁹ Baker linked the 'national' act of emancipation with the current 'international act' of abolishing slavery worldwide. Crucially, however, this discourse was still strongly framed within an imperial context: as Baker asks, '[w]ill not the British Empire lead in the way in this international effort [?]'.³⁰

Whilst the campaign against 'modern-day slavery' was reported positively and passionately within the local Bristol press, there was evidence of some public discontent over this campaign when set against the social and economic conditions of interwar Britain. Writing into the *Western Daily Press*, Will Addison drew attention to experiences of people closer to home, asking for proof of such 'acts of cruelty' in the 'slavery' outlined by campaigners, and suggested that conditions in 1930s Britain were just as bad if not worse. Having 'lived among so-called "slaves,"' he would rather be one of them than 'one of the millions of unemployed, the slaves of Christian, civilised, intelligent, refined, cultured countries.'³¹ By 1931, unemployment had risen to 2.6 million and was a key social concern.³² Helen Sturge (1858-1945) wrote in response, defending the figures and information issued by ASAPS. Involved in the organising commemorations in Bristol, Helen Sturge also had familial links to anti-

slavery through the Sturges, a prominent local Quaker family. Sturge questioned whether slavery could be regarded ‘as preferable to the condition of unemployment, bad as that is’ and suggested that Addison ‘read Lady Simon’s book on the matter.’³³ Addison replied with an account of his own experiences abroad where, he suggested, what was considered ‘slavery’ by ASAPS was seen as a form of (unpaid) domestic service by families in such countries.³⁴ Addison maintained that he ‘would rather be one of such domestics, if these are included in the word “slave” as used by the Rev. R. S. Burden and Miss Sturge, than one of the millions of unemployed’. He suggested the generalised use of the term ‘slavery’ would ‘not get humanity one step “forrader.”’³⁵ Interestingly, Addison framed his criticisms through the memory of the First World War and an imperial lens, urging that when ‘trying to help others not of the Empire, let us not forget the million dead, who died that we should care for and protect our own – as well as helping others.’³⁶

In Liverpool, without the formal centenary organising committee seen in Bristol, most commemorative activities were organised by local religious bodies. Very little public discourse or press support emerged for ASAPS’s ‘modern-day slavery’ campaign, leaving the issue to be taken up solely (and without attribution to ASAPS) by local religious institutions that used the cause largely to push their own agendas and justify their brand of ‘missionary imperialism’. Against the more Protestant context of missionary work in Bristol, in Liverpool the Catholic Church was personified as an abolitionist hero of sorts. One of the first lectures given in the city, marking the centenary of the passing of the Emancipation Act on 25 March 1933, was from Father Arthur Hughes of the Heston ‘White Fathers’, a missionary society founded in 1868 by Cardinal Lavigerie which worked in Africa, and who took their name from their white habit.³⁷ Father Hughes’s lecture, given in Picton Hall for

the Catholic Evidence Guild argued that '[t]he slavery of the pagan days has not disappeared'.³⁸ In an article discussing the lecture, the centenary and contemporary abolition efforts were coupled together as mutual moral bedfellows, where the centenary 'would not only commemorate the liberation of slavery, but would attempt to devise means of abolishing slavery from every part of the world'.³⁹ Within this *Liverpool Catholic Herald* article, the Catholic Church, which 'in all ages had done wonders for the liberation of slaves' was itself personified as an abolitionist, carrying out the work of emancipation through apparently peaceful missionary activity.⁴⁰

The work of Catholic missionaries was presented on a par with the 'heroes' of emancipation concurrently being celebrated, heroes predominantly made up of Non-Conformist Evangelicals, Methodists and Quakers. Archbishop of Liverpool, Dr Richard Joseph Downey (1881-1953), spoke as part of Roman Catholic commemorations of Emancipation in London in April that year.⁴¹ To further align historical abolition, contemporary commemoration of emancipation and the liberating status of the Catholic Church, Downey coupled the much celebrated abolitionist of the moment with an historic hero-figure of nineteenth-century anti-slavery missionary enterprise, stating that although modern-day slavery does not take the form of auctions, 'as in the dark days before Wilberforce and Lavigerie' it was still nonetheless, 'real slavery'.⁴² The *Liverpool Catholic Herald's* report on Dr Downey's speech went further to foreground religious conversion as the solution to the problem of slavery, suggesting that slavery is 'ingrained in pagan people' and little can be done about this 'until the indigenous religions and Islam in particular, cease to countenance polygamy'.⁴³ The article included testimony from missionaries working in Africa who claimed that whilst 'slavery is congenital amongst backward peoples', and their treatment by their native owners is inhumane, '[b]y comparison, white

masters are beneficent beings'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, forced labour was presented as necessary for native Africans who were 'naturally apathetic, indolent and improvident with a constitutional aversion to work in any shape or form', thereby justifying the intervention of Europeans, and Britain in particular, since the country 'led the way in many humanitarian movements', reminding readers 'that it was an Englishman, William Wilberforce, who freed the negro from his fetters'.⁴⁵

Civic identity narratives of slavery and abolition

Beyond Bristol's more fervent public support for ASAPS's 'modern day slavery' campaign, differences in scale and tone between local commemorative activities in these two cities depended in large part on variations in organisational structures and civic identity narratives. Bristol had a centenary organising committee in place from around April 1932, led by Lieutenant Colonel G. N. Wyatt; however, there is no surviving evidence that Liverpool did.⁴⁶ The Bristol committee was organised early and showed initial signs of following the ASAPS agenda closely, holding a conference in April 1932 at Rotary House where the committee discussed how best to celebrate the centenary as well as how to 'carry on the work of those who had gone before'.⁴⁷ Whilst Bristol had quite an organised and active events programme, Liverpool's events were organised largely by local religious institutions that followed their own agendas and expressed more varied sentiments.

Crucially, local histories of slavery and abolition shaped discursive engagements with the centenary. Whilst Bristol's involvement in the slave-trade had peaked by the middle of the eighteenth century, Liverpool's involvement only grew, overtaking Bristol as the leading slave port by 1746.⁴⁸ Liverpool's involvement in the

transatlantic slave trade was at its height when abolition was being most publicly debated at the end of the eighteenth century, and in 1807, the last legal year of the trade, her merchants made their largest investment, a staggering figure of £2.6 million.⁴⁹ Comparatively, no slaving vessels sailed from Bristol that year, and Bristol's overall share of the trade stood at only 2% by the end of the century.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Liverpool was more heavily involved in slave-trading than any other European port. Her ships took around two-thirds of the total number of enslaved Africans sold on the African coast between 1750 and 1807 to the Americas, a total of over 1.1 million, compared to Bristol's 480,059 in all.⁵¹ Bristol continued to have a close trading relationship with the Caribbean, however, and traded in slave-produced goods long after her slave trade had dropped off, developing a comparatively larger proportion of investment in plantation slavery.⁵² Bristol merchants, therefore, received a large slice of the compensation fund following emancipation, a point raised throughout public discourse of the centenary.⁵³ However, involvement in the more distant connection to the institution of slavery away from mainland Britain, through plantation investment and trade in the Caribbean, did not play into public discourse particularly strongly. The national 'maritimization' of the memory of slavery across Britain and Europe, through the restriction of this history to largely sea-bound activities, the Middle Passage and the slave trade rather than enslavement more broadly, has obscured this connection in public memory, meaning that Liverpool's large involvement in the slave *trade* dominated perceptions and narratives of the history of transatlantic slavery.⁵⁴

There are also differences in abolition culture in both cities. Bristol, with its long history of dissenting religious bodies and radical politics, strong Quaker base and active abolitionist Methodist organisations, had more of a 'culture' of abolition on

which to draw. By 1830, the local Anti-Slavery Society's membership stood at a healthy 84 and pertinent connections to these locals and national famous figures of the abolition movement could be made with pride.⁵⁵ Abolitionist Hannah More (1745-1833) was from Bristol, and Thomas Clarkson had a much better time in Bristol when he met with many supporters, compared to his visit to Liverpool where he was apparently met with angry sailors who tried to push him in the river Mersey.⁵⁶ Liverpool's small band of eighteenth-century abolitionists received some attention in the local press in 1933-34, though only in connection to the centenary of Wilberforce's death.⁵⁷ Even the larger support given to emancipation through various nineteenth-century anti-slavery societies was not particularly well promoted. Instead, the pro-slavery stance of Liverpool merchants and the Corporation's financial support for campaigns against abolition were brought to the fore. In one of the few official centenary events, Parliamentary Secretary of ASAPS, Sir John Harris, gave a lecture in Liverpool Cathedral, commenting on the opposition abolitionists faced in the city: '[i]t is of course well-known that this very city of Liverpool took a prominent part in protesting against the abolition of the slave traffic, and spent thousands of pounds supporting the system of slave-owning and slave-trading.'⁵⁸ Whilst this support was a matter of curious focus for national discourse, local press reporting said very little on the matter. Connections to abolition and abolitionists by comparison were made much more frequently and much more easily in Bristol through the local press reporting acts of civic boosterism. At an early meeting concerning the forthcoming centenary celebrations, the Bristol local press reported that whilst

They were sometimes told that Bristol's prosperity was based on the slave traffic. They were not told so often [...] of the honourable

part that Bristol had played in agitating for the abolition of slavery.

Bristolians were to the fore in that great fight, and he [Mr H.G.

Tanner] felt Bristolians would carry that fight forward now.⁵⁹

Public discourse sought to elevate local abolitionist figures onto the same level as more prominent figures being celebrated nationally. Bristol-based William Knibb slotted seamlessly into ‘the band of Christian Brothers’ listed as, ‘Wilberforce and Buxton, William Knibb and John Smith, Zachary MacCaulay, Dr Livingstone and others’.⁶⁰ Even Sir John Harris was framed as a contemporary local regional ‘abolitionist’, as he lived in Frome and ‘married a Somerset lady’.⁶¹ Brief mention of pro-slavery opinion in Bristol was juxtaposed against contemporary Emancipation celebrations in ways which drew on local memory narratives of slavery. When the first abolition bill was unsuccessful, one article suggested that ‘the church bells in Bristol rang for joy’; however, this was presented against contemporary public celebration of Emancipation, where ‘flags are being flown throughout the city and the church bells are ringing in celebration’ of the very thing they had rung against in the eighteenth century.⁶²

Local and familial abolition connections were at times used by Harris in his correspondence with potential supporters. In 1932, Harris wrote to a number of Liverpool notables for information concerning Liverpool Corporation’s support for pro-slavery for his forthcoming book on the history of abolition. Whilst one of his correspondents, MP Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946), was unable to confirm the incident of Liverpool Corporation putting forward £10,000 of city rates to fund pro-slavery propaganda, she ended her letter by stating that both her grandfather and great-grandfather ‘played prominent parts in the Liverpool share (?) of combating

slavery and gained considerable unpopularity by doing so.’⁶³ In her typed letter, the section ‘in the Liverpool share of’ has been added by hand, perhaps in order to make the distinction between either scales (size, impact and influence) or specificities (unpopularity of such a stance in pro-slavery Liverpool) of national and local abolition efforts. There was also some faltering over the wording and signing of a manifesto put out by ASAPS across all Christian denominations ahead of the centenary year. In correspondence, Paul Sturge, of the prominent Bristol Quaker family and descendant of Joseph Sturge, reportedly felt uneasy about signing because he felt it was aimed more at the Anglican Church, though it may also have been because he had not had enough time to read through the document.⁶⁴ Harris wrote to Sturge after he had agreed to sign the manifesto and suggested that it was ‘a most fortunate coincidence’ that he should put his name to it, ‘in view of the connection of your family with the abolition of slavery.’⁶⁵

Liverpool’s ‘exceptional’ involvement in the slave trade, a familiar dimension to local civic identity narratives, was often framed competitively in the early twentieth century: that Liverpool ‘beat Bristol and London out of the slave trade’.⁶⁶ In his centenary address, the archbishop of Liverpool stated that whilst all the ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool had exploited ‘the evil commerce’, it was Liverpool that ‘became the chief slave-trading port of England’.⁶⁷ Bristol’s historic role in transatlantic slavery is by contrast downplayed through comparison to Liverpool’s ‘exceptional’ involvement. In discussion surrounding a special ‘Book of the Week’ chosen to mark the centenary of William Wilberforce’s death, which included copies of documents relevant to Bristol’s role in the slave trade, Bristol is positioned as ‘one of three ports outside London’ which was involved in the trade. However, ‘the city did not “enjoy” a quarter of Liverpool’s share in the trade.’⁶⁸ Further, more

comfortable ground is recovered as the article goes on to discuss James Arnold, another of slavery's 'most outspoken' critics, who, as '[o]ne is glad to note', was a Bristol surgeon who served on board slave ships.⁶⁹

A series of academic lectures and museological exhibitions were hosted in Bristol as part of the centenary commemorations. In October 1933, the University of Bristol ran four lectures on the history of the slave trade given by Charles M. MacInnes, then Reader of Imperial History, later to become Professor of History at the University. MacInnes, whose book *England and Slavery* was published in 1934 and who would go on to publish *Bristol: Gateway of Empire* in 1939, familiarly reassured his audience that '[i]n the 18th century Liverpool was more developed in the trade than Bristol.'⁷⁰ MacInnes's second lecture, which he delivered at the Royal Empire Society Colonial Institute and which dealt entirely with Bristol and the slave trade, was reported in the local press. MacInnes outlined Bristol's developing involvement from the seventeenth century and its decline after the American War of Independence.⁷¹ Two small exhibitions were also set up in the Bristol Reference Library and in a special case at the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. The library exhibition included books, documents and illustrations around Bristol and the slave trade, including a grant of freedom given to Mary Ellis, an enslaved woman living in Jamaica in 1819 (whose slave-owner was from Westbury-on-Trym), and the museum exhibited a model of *Tom Cod*, the last Bristol slaver, and leg and neck irons.⁷² Such comparative exhibitions and events were not matched in Liverpool.

The connections made between Bristol's historic involvement with transatlantic slavery and the modern-day slavery campaign were frequently framed through a narrative of redemption. At the public centenary meeting at Victoria Rooms, Clifton on 30 November 1933, with John Harris and Richard Wilberforce in

attendance, the Lord Mayor outlined how work remained to be done by Bristol ‘associated as it was with some of the darker sides of slavery work in days gone by’; however, the city ‘was taking its share in removing it from other parts of the world so that all men and women should be free.’⁷³ Most articles within the *Western Daily Press* and *Bristol Post* concerning the centenary led with the modern-day slavery angle in ways which both raised and obscured connections to the city’s slave-trading past. Two articles by Helen Sturge illustrate the complexity of this historic narrative. Sturge’s articles also foregrounded the struggles of historic abolitionists. However, her article tailored for the more ‘locally’ focused *Bristol Post* had an additional paragraph defending the character of slave traders, in which she stated that ‘not all supporters of slavery were bad - many people of deservedly high reputation in other directions were among them; while, on the other hand, some whose general standards were perhaps less lofty were ardent champions of the cause of abolition.’⁷⁴ The *Bristol Post* was set up only the year before and was aimed at residents in the city itself, whereas the *Western Daily Press* had a broader readership across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Somerset.

The centenary also elicited ‘myths’ of slavery in both cities. In Bristol, local press reporting commented on the belief ‘that slaves were brought to Bristol by the ship-load and sold here by auction’, a belief which the journalists proposed existed ‘without a shadow of a foundation’.⁷⁵ The article suggested that locals could point out places in the cityscape where enslaved people ‘were “stored” to await the auction’. The article suggested that commanders of slave vessels transported small numbers of slaves ‘for personal profit’ and that this custom meant that ‘many negro slaves were brought to England, and lived and died here in servitude’.⁷⁶ Similarly, and in the only article published in the Liverpool local press to mark the passing of the act in August

1933, the *Liverpool Post and Mercury* briefly noted this centenary whilst dedicating the rest of the article to tropes of the city's slavery memory discourse. The article recounts the oft-repeated anecdote of actor George Frederick Cooke declaring, whilst drunk on a Liverpool stage, that 'every black brick in this accursed city is cemented with the blood of a negro.'⁷⁷ Liverpool is also presented as having been disadvantaged by her successes in slave-trading, the real victim perhaps, since it killed off its 'famous pioneer pottery trade', local potters relocating instead to Staffordshire. As with Bristol, the emancipation centenary is used as an occasion in which Liverpool's local myths of a slave presence can be discredited, that '[t]here is no proof that negro slaves were actually brought to Liverpool'. This is further complicated by similar contradictions expressed in relation to Bristol that, as the article suggests, 'doubtless odd ones arrived'. This matter is further nuanced by the recollection that a few years hence, an invoice for the purchase of slaves had been found in a cellar in a Henry Street warehouse, linking this area (including other warehouses and the infamous site of Gorée – often the focus of such stories) with a Liverpool slave presence.⁷⁸

The specific religious contexts of Bristol and Liverpool also shaped engagements with the centenary, 'modern-day slavery' and colonial 'others' through distinctly imperial frames. A coincidence of centenaries further complicates this picture in Bristol where the Bristol Missionary Society celebrated its own anniversary in 1934. At a meeting marking this anniversary at Broadmead Chapel, missionaries attended 'in costumes of the lands from which they have come', performing their colonial relationships. Bristol's missionary society was also discussing its own approach to 'modern-day slavery' in relation to domestic slavery in China and India in ways which drew on a 'heritage' of missionary activity, that 'Bristol had a very high missionary tradition and they tried not to live on that tradition but up to it'.⁷⁹

Coinciding bicentenary celebrations of the Evangelical revival were also commemorated in Bristol. In a paper, W. Dodgson Sykes, a principal of the Bible church missionary college, put Bristol at the centre of that revival, by citing George Whitfield and John Wesley's open air lay preaching and claiming that 'through it the slave trade was abolished'.⁸⁰ In the local press, articles recounted the contemporary missionary work being done by Bristol people to educate and train 'heathens' from 'the bind of superstition and the slavery of spells and curses on the basis that Christ cast out fear and the evil imaginings which beset the native mind.'⁸¹

In Liverpool, different religious denominations in this sectarian city presented their own sermons for the centenary. In July 1933, the Reverend Sidney Spencer (1888-1974), a Unitarian Minister who joined Hope Street Church in Liverpool in 1927, gave a centenary sermon.⁸² Spencer, who would later cause consternation by preaching pacifism during World War Two, raised similar calls to abolish modern-day slavery, but alongside an interesting critical re-assessment of the historic role of the church. Spencer drew attention to the ways in which slavery had been justified as 'the necessary outcome of human sin', criticising past religious leaders for making 'no attempt at all to abolish the institution'.⁸³ The sermon also drew upon Liverpool's historic involvement in the transatlantic slave trade in support of the supposition that '[f]or years the conscience of the Christian world was entirely unmoved in the face of its abominations' where '[m]erchants of Liverpool alone, in ten years, made a net profit of over two million sterling out of the trade, and a quarter of the ships in the port were engaged in the traffic'.⁸⁴ Although taking a far more critical tone than other sermons, Spencer ended with familiar calls for the abolition of modern-day slavery as a moral necessity, stressing that 1930s Christian people 'must go on to apply those principles to the whole of society'.⁸⁵

Religious Institutions and the Liverpool Black Presence

As the last line from Spencer's sermon illustrates, the call for contemporary 'emancipatory' action, largely the vehicle for religious conversion, was not simply aimed at Africa, but also at British society. Whilst Spencer may have been speaking in broader terms about the national moral condition of the country, religious organisations in Liverpool during this time also focused their religious paternalism more locally at Liverpool's black population. Around the emancipation centenary, the Catholic Coloured Mission was founded, initially in October 1932.⁸⁶ The Mission's work in Liverpool was framed in a language which replicated the discourse of missionary work abroad, with Liverpool's black community being repeatedly referred to as 'Liverpool's African Colony'.⁸⁷ At a lecture on the work of the African Missions Society in Picton Hall in September 1933, Bishop William Porter (1887 – 1966) of the Gold Coast related the history of the Liverpool black presence back to the transatlantic slave trade, whilst suggesting it was the subsequent trading relationship the city built up with West Africa that resulted in the city's 'colony of native Africans'. He suggested that the memory of transatlantic slavery in Africa was also the reason for current problems in missionary work and that 'the natives, remembering the slave trade feared even the religion which the white man professed.'⁸⁸

One of the missions aimed at serving the souls of Liverpool's black population, however, stood against the grain. The African Churches Mission of 122-124 Hill Street was established in 1931 by Nigerian-born Pastor George Daniels Ekarte (c. 1890-1964) who came to Liverpool around 1915.⁸⁹ In stark contrast to all

other missions aimed at Liverpool's black population, the African Churches Mission's committee was composed almost entirely of people of African descent.⁹⁰ The commemoration of emancipation under the direction of Ekarte differed significantly to those of his white neighbours. Ekarte also *used* the centenary, as ASAPS and religious institutions had, not to drive forward a campaign against 'modern-day slavery', but for promotional and fundraising ends alongside highlighting the historic and contemporary mistreatment of people of African descent. The mission hosted a commemorative thanksgiving ceremony for the Emancipation Centenary in August 1933 in which Ekarte announced an appeal for £5,000 in support of the mission's work.⁹¹ The commemorative pamphlet produced for the centenary included a history of slavery and abolition which emphasised the greed of Europeans and listed the amounts paid for enslaved people, divided by gender and age under the heading 'The Price of my Race'. In this pamphlet, Ekarte asked for forgiveness for those who applied such prices who were 'in the hands of the Christian world.'⁹² Ekarte also stressed that emancipation was not immediate, countering the 'Emancipation Moment' rhetoric of British antislavery discourse by stating that it took 30 years before the trade was abolished. During that time 'three times as many Negroes were shipped from Africa as before', and even in a ship named, quite blasphemously the 'S.S. "Jesus"'.⁹³ The pamphlet's introduction called for thanksgiving for emancipation 'on behalf of the black struggling and oppressed people of the world since the day of slavery till now', placing emancipation within a context of historic and contemporary black oppression.⁹⁴

May it please your Excellencies (sic), your respectful Petitioners are the Black Race, popularly known and classified ethnologically, as Negroes, whose

proper and legitimate home was, and is, and ever shall be, Africa, but who are scattered and dispersed the world over, not by their wish, but by the woeful trick of circumstances that reveals a terrible history of the traffic in the bodies of men... We are a people who have already suffered most terribly from the greed, lust and viciousness and injustice of others of the human race, who have for centuries imposed upon us the horrors of slavery – chattel and industrial...⁹⁵

In this passage, Ekarte frames the violence of the African Diaspora in a language of suffering and deception. At odds with much discourse surrounding the emancipation centenary, there is no tone of thankful gratitude shown to white emancipators and no discussion of an ‘emancipation moment’. Instead, Ekarte denotes a continuance of injustice, from chattel through to industrial slavery, foregrounding the ‘greed, lust and viciousness’ of white enslavers in place of any hint of black passive gratitude.

Ekarte’s discourse merges religion and politics in a Pan-African perspective by referring to the Mission as the Universal Negro Improvement and African Churches Mission in this pamphlet, echoing Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.⁹⁶ Significantly, the inclusion of a reference to ‘industrial’ as well as historic chattel slavery reflects the anti-capitalist, Marxist tone of much transnational black politics during the 1930s and 1940s.⁹⁷

In August 1934, Ekarte again addressed his congregation in commemorative sermons which diverged from the paternalistic and celebratory tones of those given by other speakers.⁹⁸ Ekarte turned the focus of commemorative discourse away from heroic abolitionists and emancipators to the experiences of enslaved Africans and, by association, to those who were responsible for imposing such cruelty. He drew on

abolitionist language to emphasise this, describing such conditions as the ‘horrors of slavery’, a phrase used by among others, William Wilberforce in 1789, black Scottish-West Indian radical Robert Wedderburn in the early nineteenth century and later Frederick Douglass.⁹⁹ Ekarte further stated that:

There are still too many people [...] eager to discover the worst in us. My race, of which I am proud, has many good qualities, not least of which is the ability to think the best of those who so often think the worst of us... My people believe that the problems of the present and the future could be solved through careful and sympathetic study of the past.¹⁰⁰

Ekarte’s sermons foreground the ill-treatment of African descended people historically, and by extension contemporarily. Despite coming from a missionary background and framing his experience in Liverpool in such terms discursively, Ekarte’s sermons and writings align far more closely with international contemporary black political discourse than to anything being said by his white religious missionary neighbours or, indeed, by ASAPS.¹⁰¹ Perhaps most comparable to his statements is the speech made by Dr. Harold Moody, President of the League of Coloured Peoples in Hull, July 1933. Moody’s speech, however, merged dominant authoritative discourse concerning the celebration of Wilberforce with a discussion of black pride in the face of contemporary anti-black racism and discrimination.¹⁰² Ekarte’s sermons diverged from this and other public discourse in Liverpool and Bristol, drawing on history not to justify contemporary power relationships, imperial processes, or even religious conversion as leaders of Liverpool’s other missions had done, but to

contextualise contemporary black experience and to place racist attitudes in a logical chronology.

Conclusion

The marking of the emancipation centenary in Liverpool and Bristol revealed important complexities within the commemoration of this dissonant past at a local level. The activities and public discourse surrounding the centenary in these former slave port cities were influenced by specific local civic identity narratives, imperial and demographic contexts. Whilst Bristol whole-heartedly endorsed ASAPS's use of the centenary within the promotion of the campaign against 'modern-day slavery', overt support for this campaign was minimal in Liverpool. Here, public discourse around the centenary was much more varied and shaped in large part by the city's distinctive historic involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary black presence. Whilst local histories of transatlantic slavery shaped public discourse around the centenary in both Bristol and Liverpool, in Liverpool this was exacerbated by the absence of the more formal bureaucratic organisation seen in Bristol. The centenary was marked in Liverpool largely by individual religious institutions where the tone of public discourse was set by the city's unique position as the historic 'slaving capital of the world' and through racialized engagements with Liverpool's black presence.

Demographic differences between Liverpool and Bristol shaped engagements with colonial 'others' in different ways. Whilst there was some challenge and contestation to the official discourse of the centenary in Bristol, this was articulated along class-lines in relation to socio-economic conditions rather than from racial

perspectives. There were very few people of African or African-Caribbean descent in Bristol during the interwar period, whereas Liverpool had a comparatively longer-standing and more sizeable black presence, large enough to be the target of white religious missionary conversion.¹⁰³ Crucially, whilst Pastor Ekarte also *used* the centenary in relation to contemporary issues, his transnational black political discourse did not promote, or even mention, ASAPS's campaign against 'modern-day slavery'. The more important themes for this black-led institution were the *history* of transatlantic slavery itself, its impact on people of African descent historically and contemporarily, and connections to ongoing exploitation and discrimination largely through the impacts of empire.

The confluence of the memory of emancipation alongside campaigns of antislavery, humanitarianism and missionary endeavour across the preceding 100 years were interlinked through imperial relationships, perception and action. Bristol's expression of support for ASAPS's modern-day slavery campaign through a narrative of redemption in relation to the city's own slaving past therefore aligns with a longer history of engagement with this 'heritage of Emancipation'. The historical and contemporary imperial context of this provincial port city, as a 'Gateway of Empire' (as C.M. MacInnes's 1939 history put it), brought forth clearly the distinctly imperial dimensions of the discourse around this campaign. Such dimensions played out particularly powerfully within imperial port cities like Bristol and Liverpool and were mediated by other actors of empire, particularly missionaries and religious institutions with such vested and comparable interests.

These themes and issues remain relevant in the twenty-first century. In July 2016, British Prime Minister Theresa May announced the creation of a five-year International Modern Slavery Fund, which included a commitment of £33 million

from the aid budget to support the government's strategy. May drew on a distinctly nationalistic memory of emancipation in her public announcement: '[j]ust as it was Britain that took an historic stand to ban slavery two centuries ago, so Britain will once again lead the way in defeating modern slavery[...].'¹⁰⁴ Recent academic projects, particularly the AHRC-funded *Anti-Slavery Usable Past* run by the universities of Hull, Nottingham, Queen's University, Belfast and in partnership with Anti-Slavery International actively and explicitly seek ways to use the historic abolition campaigns in contemporary advocacy work.¹⁰⁵ As this article has shown, the 'use' of the memory of abolition and emancipation within campaigns against 'modern-day slavery' has a long and indeed complex history. The campaign against 'modern-day slavery' in these interwar ports of empire was enacted within distinctly imperialistic frames in ways which connected the memory of emancipation and abolition with ongoing imperial concerns, attitudes and relationships. Whilst scholars and activists continue to seek ways in which to draw upon a heritage of emancipation from the history of abolition for contemporary humanitarian campaigns, it is important to acknowledge that the contested and imperial context of its commemoration is also part of this 'heritage'.

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- ³⁵ Meaning 'forwarder', or to progress, used humorously or to indicate dialect, so may signify to be read in a West Country accent.
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- ³⁷ 'The Slavery Act Centenary - Commemoration Meeting in London,' *Liverpool Catholic Herald*, April 29, 1933.
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- ⁴⁰ 'She had never used violent means in Her fight, but had endeavoured to convert the hearts and minds of the slave owners by putting before them the equality of all men before God.' Ibid.
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